

OBITUARY

Professor the Reverend Canon G R Dunstan CBE, MA HonDD HonLLD FSA HonFRCP FRCOG HonFRCPG HonFRCPCH

Gordon Dunstan was a priest who made an outstanding contribution to the study of medical ethics and whose work was recognised by four of the medical royal colleges of which he was made Fellow.

He was the leading English moral theologian of his time, committed to the multi-disciplinary discussion of issues raised by the practice of medicine. His non-partisan approach, his incisively analytical mind, and his attention to the facts, enabled him to collaborate with a wide cross-section of clinicians and research scientists: and his respect for their professionalism was fully reciprocated.

He argued persuasively that medical ethics must be shown to have an autonomy of its own and held that the concept of Natural Law was a necessary tool in discerning the moral consequences of advances in medicine.

Dunstan gained a First in History at the University of Leeds in 1938 and was awarded an MA with distinction in 1939. He trained for the priesthood at the Mirfield Fathers' College of the Resurrection and was ordained in 1941. After two curacies, he proceeded to his first academic appointment as Subwarden of St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden, a post he held until 1949, when he became Vicar of Sutton Courtenay with Appleford and a lecturer at Ripon Hall, Oxford. In 1955, he became Secretary of the Church of England Council for Social Work and a minor canon, first at St George's Chapel, Windsor and then at Westminster Abbey. He was secretary of the group appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, which produced for the Lambeth Conference of 1958 a report on *The Family in Contemporary Society*, which was influential in finally overcoming the 1908 Lambeth denunciation of contraception. He was a member of a group, also appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, which produced, in 1966, the report *Putting Asunder*, proposing irrevocable breakdown of marriage as the sole ground for divorce. Based in London from 1959, he was thus at the centre of the Church's response to social and moral questions, a position that was further recognised when, in 1967, he became the first holder of the F D Maurice Chair of Moral and Social Theology, at King's College, London.

As secretary, Dunstan was responsible for several reports produced for the Church of England Board for Social Responsibility, in particular *Sterilization: an ethical enquiry* (1962), *Abortion: an ethical discussion* (1965), and *Decisions about Life and Death: a problem of modern medicine* (1965).

Almost from its inception in 1963, Dunstan was a supporter and mentor of the London Medical Group ("a student group for the study of issues raised by the practice of medicine which concern other disciplines"), speaking at its conferences and symposia and serving on its Consultative Council. Here, he made a unique contribution to the development of the LMG, where his wealth of knowledge, both of the issues proposed by students for discussion and his acquaintance with leading clinicians, helped establish its emerging influence on medical education. He served on the governing body of the Institute of Medical Ethics, from its inauguration in 1973, and was a founder member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Medical Ethics*. He was Vice President of the Institute at the time of his death.

Together with two medical colleagues, A S Duncan and R B Welbourn, Dunstan edited the *Dictionary of Medical Ethics* (first edition 1977), "intended to provide a ready source of summary information and a guide to the best and most authoritative literature...in an ever changing field".

With his analytical mind, receptive manner, and lightness of touch, Dunstan was at his best in multidisciplinary discussion, serving with memorable distinction as chairman of two IME research projects: the ethics of clinical research on children (published in 1986) and, most notably, on the ethics of medical research involving animals (1991), which brought together the major and conflicting protagonists in the field and which, against the odds, achieved consensus.

In 1972, he gave a paper to an LMG conference with the subtitle *clarifying the issues*. His understanding of issues, his clarity of thought, and his belief that in moral debate one should always impute the highest motives to one's opponent remain an inspiration to those who were privileged to work with him. His enormous contribution to a field, which, only forty years ago, was perceived by many to be incapable of systematic and academic approach, was widely recognised and, in 1989, he was appointed CBE.

He served on a number of official bodies appointed by the Department of Health, the Home Office, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, dealing with such issues as transplant policy, animal experimentation, arms control, and disarmament.

Dunstan was, above all, a churchman rooted in the Anglican tradition (in his words "a Church of England man"); a Priest-in-Ordinary to the Queen at the Chapel Royal, St James's Palace; and, subsequently, a Chaplain to the Queen. As a man, he was gracious, scholarly, compassionate, and generous.

In retirement, he was much in demand at home and abroad: he was once seen leaving a plane at Kennedy airport with no luggage other than a battered briefcase, explaining that he was giving a lecture but not staying the night. After a fall in Paris, he went immediately and totally blind. He coped with this particularly challenging deprivation with characteristic courage and fortitude and was still to be found at choral evensong and the Sunday Eucharist in the cathedral at Exeter, when he lived in retirement, continuing to share his academic gifts and where, relatively recently, he gave a series of talks without the benefit of notes.

He was born on 25th April 1917 and died on 15th January 2004. He was predeceased, in October 2003, by his wife Ruth, whom he married in 1949, and is survived by their two sons and a daughter.

The Very Reverend E Shotton

XIX International Conference of the European Society for Philosophy of Medicine and Healthcare (together with the European Association of Centres of Medical Ethics)

Theme: "Ethics and Philosophy of Emerging Medical Technologies."

Date: 24–27 August 2005.

Place: Barcelona, Spain.

Abstracts should be submitted before 1 December 2004.

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